The Winter War

Story: The Winter War
Storylink: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/13711143/1/
Category: Golden Sun
Genre: Fantasy/Adventure
Author: Earendil3
Authorlink: https://www.fanfiction.net/u/4997738/
Last updated: 10/07/2020
Words: 19205
Rating: T
Status: In Progress
Content: Chapter 1 to 7 of 7 chapters
Source: FanFiction.net

Summary: The sequel to 'The First Fall'. A story of the struggles that follows the events of 'Dark Dawn'. Covers the sixteen playable characters, the mystery of the Anemos, the ancient history of Weyard, a massive war that spreads across Weyard, the Tuaparang and their enigmatic leader, the psynergy vortexes, and of course, Alex.

Chapter 1: Forward

*Before you jump into this, you should know that this is the **sequel** and conclusion to my other story, 'The First Fall'. It will make almost no sense if you haven't read it. Also, there will be no third book. Together with 'The First Fall', the two books cover almost every character and plot line introduced in the games. All of the main sixteen heroes have chapters written from their perspective. The story covers the Anemos, the ancient history of Weyard, a massive war that spreads across Weyard, the mysteries of the Tuaparang, the psynergy vortexes, and of course, Alex. I tried my best to tie everything into a cohesive story, while introducing some new concepts and characters. I hope the two books bring the saga to a satisfying conclusion.*

I've been writing this for a while and it's about three quarters finished. I'm starting to publish chapters now with the hope that this will motivate me to finish by November 29, 2020, the tenth year anniversary of the North America release of Dark Dawn. I'm going to try to be publishing two to three chapters a week. All together there will be around 70 chapters, but they're all quite short.

If you've already read 'The First Fall' but forget what happened, I'll include a recap below. Please don't read this if you haven't read 'The First Fall' yet!

Finally, thanks a lot for taking the time to read! I really hope you enjoy it.

Scroll down for the recap.

A lot of these events happen simultaneously but I've split it up by major storylines to keep it easier to follow.

Matthew, Karis, and Tyrell return home

'The First Fall' begins with Matthew, Karis, and Tyrell returning to the Lookout Cabin after the Grave Eclipse has ended. They find Garet there, but Isaac is missing. During Matthew's journey, he had frequent visions of the Wise One being in danger (this was actually inspired by Isaac's dialogue in 'Dark Dawn'). After the Eclipse ended, Isaac went out on his own to find the Wise One in Sol Sanctum.

When Matthew and his friends arrive, they join with Garet and head out across the Mount Aleph Crater to find Isaac. There, they encounter Takeru, the samurai son of Susa and Kushinada, and brother of Himi. He had traveled all the way across Weyard to find and save Isaac after Himi had a premonition of him in danger (again, this is lifted straight from 'Dark Dawn'). Takeru found Isaac unconscious and was caring for him. Nothing the party could do could bring Isaac back, but Takeru suggested they bring him to Himi, who could use her Third Eye ability to understand just what was ailing Isaac.

At this point, Matthew decided that he needed to fulfill his father's mission of finding the Wise One. He took the newly repaired soarwing, and flew to Sol Sanctum. Since the soarwing could only take one person, the rest of the party decided to take Isaac to Yamata City, where Himi could hopefully heal him.

The Sanan Invasion begins

Shortly after the events of Dark Dawn, Eoleo the pirate stopped at Tonfon on his trip home. There he witnessed the assassination of Emperor Unan at the hands of a mysterious assassin. Eoleo chased the assassin through the city, but couldn't catch him. Soon after, the tyrant King Wo arrived

with his army. In tow, they had the body of a Morgal beastman who they claimed to be the assassin. King Wo urged the people to wage an immediate war against the Beastman, and claimed to be the only one able to lead them to victory. The majority of the Sanans agreed, and Wo was named the new Emperor. Eoleo's ship was burned by Wo's men, so he fled the city on horseback.

The pirate headed to Ayuthay, to seek the help of Amiti. He arrived in the city shortly after the death of King Paithos, and the coronation of Amiti. Amiti mustered an army of willing Ayuthayns, and began the march north to come to Queen Sveta and Morgal's aid. They attempted to send messenger birds to warn Sveta, but they were all shot down over the Khiren Highlands, which the Sanans controlled.

Under the veil of secrecy, the Sanan fleet struck Belinsk in the night,, and completely overwhelmed the city. A Sanan general named Ban-Jei led the invasion. Ryu Kou, an old ally of Matthew's, acted as captain of the invading force, having been manipulated by the lies of Emperor Wo. During the attack, Queen Sveta was taken captive.

Ruy Kou led an army of Sanans to the Khiren Highlands, with Queen Sveta as a hostage. There they encountered the Ayuthayan army, and with the threat of killing Sveta, they ordered Amiti to stop in his tracks. As proof, they gave Amiti Sveta's Umbra Gear. Amiti and Eoleo had no other choice then to stop the forward march. The army made camp on the Khiren Highlands.

At this point, Sveta encountered an unlikely ally. Felix, who had been missing for years, broke her out of the Sanan camp. Felix had become a wanderer, traveling Weyard protecting the citizens against the dark power of Luna, which included the Tuaparang's powers, and the vortexes.

Years before the story, he found a mountain in Tundaria, at the southern tip of Weyard. Inside of it was Luna Sanctum, the opposite and equal of Sol Sanctum. There he encountered a map which showed all of Weyard, and where the threats of Luna's power loomed. He spent his life finding and dispelling these threats. One such threat was the Grave Eclipse. During this cataclysm, Felix followed behind Matthew's group, ready to jump in if he was needed. Yet, he had grown afraid of people, especially those that had been close to him. He was afraid they would hate him for abandoning them, so he never made direct contact with Matthew.

When he found the Sanan camp on the Khiren Glacier, he had been on his way to the distant Northern Wastes. The map in Luna Sanctum had shown him a greater threat in the north than any he had yet encountered. He decided he had to come out of hiding and save Sveta, because no one else would. Together they escaped the glacier, with Ryu Kou's help. The Sanan repented of his deeds, and died to secure safe passage for Felix and Sveta. Felix continued northwards, while Sveta made her way towards Kolima Forest. She had been called there by visions, just like the ones Felix had been called by almost all of his life. It was a struggle for her to choose to leave Morgal under the Sanan occupation, but in the end she was convinced that the Waelda of the woods, Tret and Laurel, would only call her if it was of the utmost importance.

Mei-Da, a commander of the Sanan army who sympathized with Amiti, revealed to him and Eoleo that Sveta had escaped. With no hostage, the Sanans were forced to retreat north, and the Ayuthayan army continued their march towards Belinsk, where they would attempt to liberate the city from the Sanan occupiers.

Matthew journeys to Sol Sanctum and beyond

After separating from Karis, Tyrell, Garet, and Takeru, Matthew headed for Sol Sanctum. When he made it there, he found the Wise One had already been destroyed. By who or what, he could not tell. He also found a secret room within the Sanctum, where he found a massive mural of Weyard and the elements. He saw a man guarding all of Weyard with two arms. With one arm, he protected against the power of Sol, and with the other he protected against the power of Luna.

When Matthew attempted to leave the Sanctum, he was ambushed by a group of Tuarapang soldiers. They were led by a large man with a dark axe named Palos. He learned from Palos that Blados and Chalis were rebels against the Tuaparang High Empyror. Using the soarwing, Matthew escaped their clutches by flying out of the sanctum.

The Tuaparang pursued in a flying ship. But Matthew was saved by another ship called the Canary, and the Tuaparang were driven away. On the Canary Matthew learned that his saviours were Anemos. WIth them was Sheba, a Warrior of Vale who Matthew had known only from stories. Matthew also met two men there, Ezio who was a good friend of Sheba's, and Rego who was a part of another faction of Anemos called the Burgandy. Against Sheba's wishes, Rego took Matthew as a captive.

They brought Matthew back to the city of Anemos where their leader, Callen, put him in a prison. He learned that the Burgandy were an elite group of families who ruled Anemos as an oligarchy. They were intensely isolationist and were led by a woman named Callen. Sheba, being of the opinion that Anemos should rejoin Weyard, was in conflict with them constantly. Matthew also learned that she had found the

Anemos after years of searching, and was accepted as a lost member of their race.

Meanwhile, Sheba encountered her Aunt Riza for the first time. Finally, she learned of her true heritage. She was born on Anemos, and her birth had matched all the signs of an ancient prophecy. She was believed to be Yegelos' heir, the one destined to wield the Darkguard, a mythical shield, and defeat the Moon King Reborn. The Moon King was an ancient tyrant who at one point had ruled over Anemos. The prophecy stated that he would be reborn, and that Sheba would defeat him.

Because of this, the Burgandies demanded to be given Sheba in order to train her in their ways, as a part of their secret army. Sheba's parents dismissed this, knowing that those trained by the Burgandies were brainwashed into servitude. Instead, they used Jupiter Psynergy to send her floating down to Weyard, far from the Burgandies reach. There, she was found and raised by Faran of Lalivero. In retribution, Sheba's parents were executed.

Sheba became determined to fulfill her prophecy and defeat the Moon King Reborn, who most believed to be the High Empyror of the Tuaparang. Knowing about the prophecy, the High Empyror attacked Anemos in a massive invasion, hoping to kill the one prophesied to defeat him. Using the attack as a distraction, Sheba freed Matthew from the cells. Sheba knew the lost city of the Tuaparang was somewhere in the Northern Wastes, but she didn't know exactly. So she sent Matthew to find a map to the city of the Tuaparang, which was located in an evil shrine dedicated to the ancient Moon King.

Sheba followed the prophecy to find the Darkguard. Callen attempted to stop her, not believing her worthy of the

prophecy. At the last second, Rego, one of Callen's soldiers who had been nearly brainwashed, changed sides and killed Callen. He let Sheba go with the darkguard. With Ezios, Sheba got on board the Canary and attempted to confront the High Empyror. But her ship was crippled by Palos, and sent careening towards Weyard. Matthew escaped the city also, using his soarwing, but was separated from Sheba. Just before Sheba was out of range, her Aunt Riza sent her a message telepathically. Riza told Sheba that Matthew had found the map to the Tuaparang, and that he would meet her in Imil. Together they could use the map and Darkguard to find and defeat the Tuaparang.

The Battle of Kalay and the Billibin Rebellion

After Matthew left on the soarwing to find the Wise One, Garet led Karis, Tyrell, and Takeru towards Kalay. There, they hoped to get a ship and head for Yamata City, where Himi could save Isaac. Along the way, they encountered Patcher, who revealed that Kalay and Tolbi were now at war, Tolbi being the aggressor.

In Kalay, the group met up with Ivan and Jenna, along with Jenna's daughter and Matthew's sister Beth. They learned that Tolbi had the control of monsters, that they mastered with mysteriou torches of red light. King Iodem had styled himself an Emperor and was no longer communicating with Hammet of Kalay. No one knew what his motives were. The adepts decided that they could not all go to Yamata City, because Kalay was in imminent danger. It was decided that Garet, Jenna, and Takeru would take Isaac to Yamata City. In their company was Ophelia, a Kalayan ship captain, and her crew.

The rest, which included Karis, Tyrell, Ivan, and Beth, would protect Kalay from invasion. The attack came sooner than

anyone thought, and the city was overwhelmed by monsters. Karis and Tyrell escaped, but Ivan and Beth were taken prisoner by the Tolbi forces. Lord Hammet died in the battle. Karis and Tyrell met up with Carver and a few other leaders from Kalay and Goma. Together they decided that children and those who could not fight should go to various fortresses to weather the storm. They went to Lunpa and Patcher's Place.

Those that could fight headed towards Bilibin in order to ask for help. Bilibin had stone walls and towers, and would be a stronger defense than any of the other fortresses. Their goal was to secure Lord McCoy's help and have the refugees travel to Bilibin. Since McCoy was dangerous, it was decided that the able bodied people would go there first, which included Karis and Tyrell.

In between Carver's Camp and Bilibin, was Grey Brook Pass, the only way through the mountains. There Karis and Tyrell encountered some new friends, Penny and Yakub. They were a part of a Bilibinese rebel group that was striving against McCoy's tyranny and mistreatment of the beastmen. The group was led by a fighter named Anderjack. Anderjack had been a lumberjack who fell in love with and married a beastwoman. When McCoy's men found out, Anderjack's wife was executed. In response, Anderjack led a rebellion.

Having a common cause with Anderjack, to take Bilibin, Karis and Tyrell joined forces with him. Together the rebels won a key battle against Lord McCoys son. There, to their immense surprise, they met up with Matthew who had just crash landed his soarwing nearby after the Tuarparang's attack on Anemos. His mission was to meet Sheba in Imil, but he couldn't travel to Imil until McCoy was dealt with. So the three friends helped Anderjack take back Bilibin. Lord McCoy was taken prisoner and Lady McCoy was killed by

one of her servants. Their daughter, Margaret, encouraged the rebel takeover and named Anderjack the new king of Bilibin. Messengers were sent to the refugees of Goma that Bilibin was now a safe place to go.

Karis, Tyrell, and Matthew learned that the road forward for Matthew towards Imil was still blocked. The Sanan army had taken almost all of Morgal. Anderjack and Margaret, desiring to right their Bilibin's wrongs against Morgal, mustered an army to try and liberate Morgal. The adepts together with their new friends marched forward.

Mia's journey to the Northern Wastes

Shortly after Rief arrived home in Imil, after his quest to end the Grave Eclipse, Alex arrived in Imil. He had a mysterious conversation with Mia, where he indicated that he wanted to save Weyard from itself. Meanwhile, Megan, a member of the Mercury clan had been lost for days somewhere near the Mercury Lighthouse. Mia set out to find her. While she was gone and against her wishes, Rief set out with Kraden and his friend Lycus to track and capture Alex.

Mia found Megan in dire condition near a Psynergy Vortex. Unexpected help came to her from Chalis the Tuaparang. After Megan was well enough to head back for Imil, Mia decided to follow Chalis, desiring to stop her from whatever evil doing was next. Mia followed Chalis to the Northern Wastes, where danger yet again forced them to act as allies. Eventually, Mia learned that Chalis was working against the High Empyror of Tuaparang to stop some great calamity. That's why they had tried to activate the Apollo's Lens, to try and use it as a weapon against the High Empyror's plotting. It was even why they started the Grave Eclipse, because they believed they needed to do that first, before they could access the Lens. Mia also learned that Spados

had died shortly after the Apollo's Lens fired, and their ship crash landed in the mountains. The two agreed to work as allies, but on the way to Tuaparag Chalis betrayed Mia.

Mia was captured and held captive in the ancient city of the Tuaparang, where she learned that Chalis was actually the one who had assassinated Unan, as a part of a deal with Wo. In exchange she was granted safe passage by ship to the north. In her cell, Mia met the High Empyror and learned that he had been activating an ancient dark machine called the Umbra Machine, which he intended to use to wield Luna's power and take over Weyard. The machine was a great tunnel into the side of edge Weyard, that worked by harnessing the Luna power of the abyss that surrounded Weyard.

Mia witnessed the High Empyor activating the Umbra Machine, as a part of a great ceremony where almost all the Tuaraparang were a part of. Chalis, who had only betrayed Mia to gain the Empyror's trust, attempted to stop him at the last second, but was thrown off the machine to her presumed death. The Empyror, or Moon King Reborn, successfully powered up his ancient machine, and with it he wielded the full power of the abyss.

Rief and Kraden travel to Mount Roc

After their departure from Imil, Rief and Kraden tracked Alex all the way across Morgal, with the help of their friend Lycus' help, who was an expert tracker. During their journey, the Sanan invasion of Morgal commenced, but the three travelers were able to evade the major battles.

They tracked Alex all the way to Mount Roc, where they witnessed him collecting Magma Shards from the carcass of the Mountain Roc. They learned that Alex was headed back

to the Alchemy Dynamo below Belinsk for mysterious purposes. Unsure of what to do, they used a magic messenger bird to find Isaac and send him a message. Knowing that he contained a part of the Golden Sun, along with Alex, they believed that he was the only one able to stop Alex from whatever new evil purposes he had.

Garet and Jenna sail to Yamata City to save Isaac

Shortly after Garet, Jenna, Isaac, Takeru, and Captain Ophelia's departure from Kalay, they encountered a mysteriou spirit on the ocean. It was a tall figure covered in fog. Other than this, the journey was uneventful and the group made it to Yamata City where Susa and Kushinada graciously hosted them.

Himi worked for days on trying to heal Isaac. She discovered that the problem was a vortex that had actually started inside Isaac's chest. The only way he was surviving was because of the Golden Sun fragment within him. During his coma, Isaac experienced visions of the ancient past, of eight heroes who sealed the elements to stop a massive war between an emperor named Apollo, and a tyrant named the Moon King.

Through his visions, he discovered that the Wise One was created by these heroes to act as a warden over Weyard while it was in its dark age. His purpose was to wait until the time was right, and then find new heroes to release the elements once again. Once his purpose was over, the power that the heroes gave him was drained and he ceased to exist. Isaac also learned that the purpose of the Golden Sun was to ease the transition that the release of the elements would cause. It was meant to stop the earthquakes and vortexes. That plan was changed when Alex attempted to seize some of the Golden Sun for himself. The Wise One

decided that he had to imbue some of the Golden Sun's power into Isaac so that he stood a chance against Alex.

When Himi finished healing Isaac, the hero of Vale awoke with renewed purpose. He knew he had to stop Alex with the power of the Golden Sun, and to then release the Golden Sun back into Weyard, so that the earth could heal. Shortly after his awakening, the messenger bird from Kraden and Rief arrived, letting Isaac know that Alex would be in Belinsk. Isaac, Jenna, and Garet immediately set out to defeat him.

Takeru decided to go with Isaac, and Himi left with some friends to try and find the meaning behind the fog spirit that had been plaguing the Eastern Sea. Himi successfully found the spirit, who she learned was an ancient devout general of the evil Emperor Apollo. The spirit was called the Fog Princess, and now desired to find Apollo Reborn, who she would follow to war.

The Heroes of Vale venture to the underground Dynamo

When Isaac made it to the depths of the dynamo, they found Alex was nowhere to be seen. Instead they found Lycus there, who led them to Belinsk's under-lair, claiming there was a danger there that Isaac needed to stop. Without warning, the Imilian abandoned them, and Isaac and his friends had accidentally activated a well of power that was about to explode beneath Belinsk. It was the power of Apollo's Lens that had been used to deactivate the Ecipse, now stored inside the dynamo reading to blow.

Alex's plan all along had been to activate the Eclipse, in order to start the Lens, in order to use it to stop the Eclipse, so that its power would be stored inside the Dynamo. Then

he would draw Isaac to the dynamo, so that Isaac would accidentally unleash its power and be killed in the explosion. In this way, Alex planned to rid Weyard of his chief rival. He manipulated the young man Lycus into helping him, and intentionally drew Rief and Kraden to Mount Roc. There, he was made sure that his 'plans' were overheard, so that Isaac would be sent to the dynamo.

The plan worked perfectly, and Isaac accidentally unleashed the dynamo's explosive force, thinking that he was stopping Alex's plan. Isaac used his Golden Sun powers to hold the explosion at bay, and made the others retreat. Garet and Jenna saved everyone in the city from death, and once they were far enough away, the city was destroyed. Isaac gave his life to save everyone, Sanan occupiers and beasman alike. Upon his death, his portion of the Golden Sun went back into the earth and began a process of healing.

Garet and Jenna returned to a beastman camp west of the city.

The Battle of Ard Mezza

Meanwhile, Karis, Matthew, Tyrell, and the Bilibin army encountered a Sanan army lead by Ban-Jei on the plains of Morgal. A beastman army under Sveta's General Roman came to Bilibin's aid, and the Battle of Ard Mezza took place. Roman and Ban-Jei killed eachother in one on one combat.

Snow began to fall as Alex arrived on the battlefield. He revealed to Matthew his plan to destroy Isaac, and that it had been a success. Enraged, the two engaged in combat. Just as the battle began tipping in the Sanans favours, horns were heard from the south. King Amiti's army of Ayuthayans arrived just in time, and the Sanans were routed. Alex escaped.

After the battle, a major blizzard trapped the combined army at the site of the battle. Winter had begun to rage. The adepts tried to determine where they would go next. Privately, Matthew decided that he would head to Imil alone, unwilling to bring his friends into the treacherous north in the heart of winter. The morning that the snow subsided, Matthew headed north alone. Only realizing he was gone hours later, his friends pursued.

Ivan is captured

After the Battle of Kalay, Ivan and Matthew's little sister Beth were captured by Tolbi soldiers. The two warriors ended up in separate groups. On the path to Tolbi, Ivan's group was ambushed by a group of rebels called the Rakers. Sean and Ouranos, the warriors of Colosso, were among them. After being saved, the Rakers helped a disguised Ivan secretly enter Tolbi.

He was met by a surprise, when Piers approached him, also in disguise. Similar to Ivan, Piers had also been captured by the Tolbi soldiers and saved by the Rakers. This had occurred earlier on in the story, when Piers was traveling north to drop Nowell off in Imil. Unfortunately, Nowell was not saved by the rakers, and now shared a jail cell with Beth.

Seeking help to save Beth and Nowell, the two companions met up with Sophia, an undercover gardener at the palace of Iodem and the leader of the Rakers. Sophia, unwilling to trust Ivan and Piers just yet, tasked them with infiltrating Iodem's palace and discover how the Tolbi soldiers are controlling the beasts.

Ivan and Piers follow through with the plan, and as disguised guards they witness a secret meeting between Iodem and

his wife-to-be, Princess Tanela of Lalivero. Piers quickly discovers that Iodem has been taking the Lemurian draught, which is known to make non-Lemurians behave erratically. Before they can get any more information, a mysterious third guest arrives at the meeting. It becomes clear to the two warriors that this mysterious man has been pulling Iodem's strings all along. Just as they start to realize who the mystery man is, Alex reveals himself to them. Having sensed their presence, the tyrant sends a psynergetic attack at them.

The beginning of a new era

'The First Fall' ends with Bilibin under the new leadership of Anderjack. Morgal has been liberated, but it's capital city destroyed and its queen missing. Emperor Wo still rules Sana with an iron fist. Worse yet, the evil Empyror has activated his dark machine, and Alex is plotting to take over all of Weyard through his servant Iodem. Tolbi's monster army covers all of Gondowan and half of Angara. Matthew and Sheba are headed to Imil to meet, and unbeknownst to them Felix is headed in the same direction, with the same purpose: to destroy the Empyror and his machine. Mia is being held captive by the Tuaparang. Karis, Tyrell, Amiti, and Eoleo have begun to pursue their friend Matthew. Jenna and Garet are reeling from the death of Isaac, while Ivan and Piers are being attacked by Alex in the heart of his new empire.

Chapter 2: Down to One

The sun danced between white velvet clouds that roamed the sky like livestock. Every few minutes the glare of it would blind Jenna, forcing her to put a hand up on her brow. It didn't matter much to her though. She was a hero. There was a floating dwarf fortress to get to. There were friends to save. She ran along the river bank, bounding up stones and earth, each step feeling lighter than the last.

She looked behind her. "Hurry up!"

A young boy with sandy blonde hair tried to speed up to follow. He lost his footing on a rock, and his left foot shot out to break his fall. Too close to the water. It descended a foot into the water and mud below. Slowly he looked up with a thin smile.

"Isaac!" Jenna laughed.

Jenna woke up to the sound of the earliest of birds chirping. She tried to shake the dream off. Shake the memory of playing in old Vale. In its place came a memory of Isaac in the Dynamo. Isaac trying to stop the explosion. Trying to save Belinsk. She buried her face in her palms. She could feel her legs start to shake. She told them not to. But they did anyway. For just a flash of a moment, she felt anger. She pounded her fist to her thigh. *No no no no.*

"Isaac," she whispered. She hadn't meant to say it out loud. Then the tears came.

A while later, the sun came up. Jenna talked a little with Garet. Not about Isaac. She could barely even say his name. But still, talking with Garet did seem to help. She supposed he was the only friend she had who truly understood. Garet had lost his wife during the Mourning Moon over ten years ago. Jenna had tried to comfort him then. Not much helped.

She talked a little with Okin and Khurt, the beastmen leaders. All around her, beastmen were preparing for battle. They knew that the Sanan army led by Ban-Jei was still at large somewhere in Morgal. They also knew that Roman's beastmen army hadn't been heard from in days. They feared the worst. These weren't the strongest warriors around Jenna, they were mostly refugees from Belinsk. It didn't seem to matter though. They looked like fiercer warriors than most full grown men from Kalay.

The hidden cove and beach was bustling with activity. Blacksmiths clanked swords loudly, some children played on the beach, running up and down with the waves to not get wet. Beastmen conversed in small circles surrounding fire pits. A light snow fell, making the beach a mix of white and beige. Some ice was beginning to form in the water.

Jenna stood next to Garet, Khurt, and Okin fletching arrows. She turned behind her as the footsteps of a beastman rapidly approached. A female beastman, with blue fur and round ears. She looked about twenty, but it was hard for Jenna to tell the age of beastmen.

"Captain!" she saluted Khurt, who returned the gesture.

"Tasha!" Khurt hugged the beastmen. Okin gave her a kindly smile and greeting. Awkwardly Khurt. turned to Jenna and Garet. "This is Garet and Jenna. Warriors of Vale."

Tasha's eyes widened. "It is an honour!" She bowed and shook their hands.

"General Roman… the army. What happened?" Khurt asked. His fur was standing on its ends.

Tasha frowned. "There was a battle…" she trailed off.

"You were there?" Okien asked seriously.

Tasha nodded. For the next few minutes Tasha recounted what had happened at Ard Mezza. General Roman captured the advancing Billish army, but became fast allies when Ban-Jei attacked. Both generals had died in single combat, but the battle was one when unexpected allies arrived from Ei-Jei. King Amiti and the Ayuthayan army. Jenna had heard of the boy before. A companion of Matt's. Only then, he hadn't been a king.

"The adepts who fought with the Bilibin army… what were their names?" Jenna asked once the story was finished.

Tasha looked thoughtful for a second. She scratched her chin. "A ginger fellow… Tyrone?"

"Tyrell?" Garet asked. His eyes twinkled. Jenna couldn't tell if it was worry or excitement.

Tasha nodded. "Ya that's it. A girl with green hair. And a boy with a yellow scarf."

"Karis and Matt?" Jenna asked. There was a lump stuck in her throat.

"Ya, that's it. You know them?" Tasha asked.

Jenna smiled. "Matt's my son. And Tyrell's his son," Jenna said, pointing at Garet.

Tasha's eyes widened. "Children of the Warriors of Vale? No wonder they're so powerful…"

"What do you mean?" Garet asked.

"They practically won the battle for us. The Sanans charged us… they would have wiped us out. But your kids… they used their magic to break the line," Tasha explained, beaming.

"Psynergy," Khurt corrected. "It's called psynergy."

"Psnergy then," Tasha murmured. A snowflake flew into her eye and she rubbed it away.

Okin ran a hand through his white beard. Only Jenna wasn't sure if you called it a beard when it was on a beastman. *A mane?* she wondered.

"It seems we're preparing for a battle that has already been won," Okin said with his raspy voice. He gestured at the beastmen all around them, who were preparing for battle.

Tasha frowned. "I'm afraid not."

"What do you mean?" Khurt asked, his voice cracking a little with worry.

Tasha hesitated. "Tolbi. The horde," Garet said flatly. "They're approaching?"

Tasha nodded. "There's scarcely any word from Goma anymore. We suspect the entire region has been overrun. They're probably passing through Grey Brook Pass as we

speak. Which means Bilibin is next. And then us." She shuddered.

"And our fortress has fallen," Khurt said quietly. He stared into the distance.

"So it's true? Belinsk is… gone?" Tasha said. Her eyes began to well up in tears. Jenna's vision blurred as tears began to form in her own eyes.

"It is," Khurt said solemnly.

Tasha put a fist to her chest, a salute extremely personal to the beastman race. Okin and Khurt mimicked the gesture.

"I'm so sorry," Garet added, putting a hand on the girl's shoulder.

She nodded, "Thank you."

Okin smiled weakly. "Most of us made it out. Thanks to Isaac."

Khurt nodded. "He saved us."

Tasha sighed in sudden realization. "He didn't… he didn't make it?"

Khurt shook his head.

Tasha looked down at her feet then back up at Garet and Jenna. "I'm sorry," she said quietly. "I'm… forever grateful."

Hot tears warmed Jenna's face from the cold winter wind. "Thank you," she said.

Later on in the day, Khurt gathered up his advisors along with Jenna and Garet. They stood on top of the cliffs that overlooked the hidden cove. Surrounding them were tall pine trees, covered in a thin layer of snow.

"Will you lead the army now? Now that General Roman is gone?" Tasha asked. Gusts of wind blew her fur up and down. The trees offered some protection from the winter, but not much. Khurt looked blankly at the others. They were mostly advisors to Queen Sveta. None of them had significant military experience. All the captains and commanders had been with General Roman at Ard Mezza.

"You're the highest ranking member of the military now. The others… didn't make it," Tasha said. She followed that with the beastmen salute. The others followed suit.

"I'd have no other lead us Khurt. If the Queen were here, I'm sure that she would agree," Okin added.

Khurt nodded.

"It's decided then," Okin said, beaming with pride. He put a hand on the younger beastman's shoulder. Squeezing it lightly. "What's our next move?"

Khurt looked at each of them seriously and then up for a moment, before speaking. "I will go to Ard Mezza to treat with Anderjack and King Amiti. If I'm to command the army, I must be with the army. Tasha will accompany me."

The advisors murmured their agreement. "What about us?" one of them piped up.

"You will lead the people to the secret fortress," Khurt said seriously.

The advisors broke into gasps and whispers. One of their voices rose above the rest. "General… we do not know the way. Only the royal family knows of the secret fortress."

Khurt gave a small smile. "If that were true, we'd be in trouble right now."

Okien chuckled. "It was a bad policy. That's why Sveta did away with it."

Khurt nodded. "There are a few others who know of its location. General Roman was one of them. I am another. And so is Okin. He will lead you there."

Okin nodded, "It would be an honour general."

Khurt wiped snow from his brow. "There, you will be safe," he said firmly. The new role seemed to suit him. *General Khurt,* Jenna thought. Khurt turned to Jenna and Garet. "The secret fortress is a place meant for *only* beastmen. An exception shall be made for you and your children. You are welcome to join Okin."

The advisors murmured. The air was of clear discontent. "It is a holy place," one voice said a little too loudly.

"Enough," Khurt cut through the voices. "These are the Warriors of Vale. They are the sole reason we are alive today. They are *welcome*." The voices stopped. A few quiet apologies could be heard. Some small bows, to both Khurt and the Warriors of Vale.

Garet looked at Jenna, unsure of whether or not to speak. Jenna had done enough speaking for the day. Every word felt like work to her. Ever since she lost Isaac. She nodded at Garet to speak.

"We are very honoured. But we won't be accompanying you. We have other tasks to attend to," Garet explained. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"Other tasks?" Tasha asked curiously.

Garet nodded. "Tolbi. You can wait out the storm in your fortress, but someone needs to make sure the storm actually *ends*. We're going to Tolbi to end it."

Jenna nodded to show her agreement. The pair had come up with the plan shortly after they heard Ban-Jei and the Sanans had been dealt with. The number of problems plaguing Angara had shrunk to just one. One was a number that Jenna felt like she could deal with. One. Iodem.

"Good luck," Khurt said. He bowed deeply.

Jenna and Garet wasted no time. The very next morning they were packing the ship with Ophelia's crew. No matter what they tried, Captain Ophelia and the Kalayan sailors would not take no for an answer. Takeru was there too, polishing his katana. He had quickly become part of the crew. They would accompany Jenna and Garet to Tolbi. Most of them were excited for the challenge. The way they saw it, they were finally tackling the real problem. The problem that had taken their homes from them. The problem that had taken the lives of their friends and families. There was no lack of motivation in this group.

"Perfect time to leave too," Ophelia mentioned, her wavy hair blowing in the snowy wind. She heaved as she hoisted up a barrel onto the deck of the *Tritan*. "If we wait any longer, we might be iced in."

Jenna looked out at the northern ocean. It would certainly be frozen in no time. Perhaps in the next week even. Some large chunks of ice rolled gently into the ship's hull, rocking it more violently than usual.

Jenna heard an annoying caw circling above her. It was Jersey, the messenger bird. She looked over at Garet, who was wearing a wool cap that covered his red hair. "You called him," Jenna asked.

"Aye," Garet responded. *Aye?* Jenna thought. *Oh brother.*

"To write the kids?" she thought, realizing that it was a good idea.

Garet nodded, producing a small piece of paper from his pocket. He handed it to Jenna. It explained to Matt, Karis, and Tyrell where they were going. It urged them to head for the strongholds of Morgal and wait out the storm. It made no mention of Isaac. Jenna was sure that Matt had already heard anyways. What could she say in a note that would comfort him? She would wait. Wait to see her boy in person.

"Good?" Garet asked. Jenna nodded and handed the page back to Garet. He tied it to Jersey's ankle and the bird was off in a flurry of squawks and feathers. Jenna cringed at the sound of it.

"Alright crew!" Ophelia's voice rang over the sound of the howling wind. "All hands! We're off."

The crew cheered. Someone loudly said, "Down with the horde! Down with Iodem!"

"Aye!" Garet added loudly. He was beaming.

"Why is that whenever you step onto the deck of a ship you become a pirate?" she bantered.

Garet gasped. "What? The 'aye'? It's a great word."

Jenna rolled her eyes. She felt a smile form on her lips. The feeling of it felt foreign to her.

Chapter 3: A New Era

The snows had stopped finally. The extreme winter storm that had left feet and feet of snow had at long last come to an end. The sun was high in the sky, and the armies of Bilibin, Morgal, and Ayuthay had begun packing away their things. Most of the tents had been taken down. The horses and donkeys were loaded with weapons and supplies.

At the edge of camp, Eoleo caught up with Amiti and the others. A series of fresh footsteps lead away from the camp and into a forest of towering pine trees, needles heavy with snow. Snow that nearly blinded Eoleo as the bright sun reflected powerfully off of it.

"Tyrell!" Karis shouted. She wore a dark green coat with grey fur. Beside her was Amiti, who's own jacket looked uncomfortable. Karis started to follow the track of footsteps.

"Where's Matt?" Eoleo asked Amiti.

The younger Adept shook his head. "He went away." The Ayuthayan King looked at the line of pine trees where the footsteps disappeared. He trailed off, as if unwilling or unable to continue.

There was another there too. A beastman soldier with leather armour and a worried look. "What happened?" Eoleo addressed the question to the beastman this time.

"He left to go hunting," the soldier said quietly

"When?" Eoleo pressed.

"Just after midnight I think," the beastman said, looking up to the sky as if to get an idea of what time it was.

Eoleo's eyes widened, "You let him go?"

"He said he was hunting."

"At *midnight?*"

The soldier scowled. "He's one of your kind," he said looking Eoleo up and down, "I don't know how you operate!" Eoleo wasn't sure if the soldier meant a human or Adept. It didn't matter. He shook his head silently before looking back at Amiti. His ears were red underneath his gold crown. The expression on his face was blank. "You should wear a real hat," Eoleo scoffed. He pulled a simple wool hat from his pack and handed it to Amiti, who put it on. Karis continued to track the footsteps, calling out Tyrell's name. "Where did he go?" Eoleo asked.

"To the Tuaparang. To fight the Empyror," Amiti said while looking at his feet. Eoleo didn't understand what was going on. He had barely spoken to Matt, Karis, or Tyrell since the storm started. Since the battle. Eoleo shuddered. He had been a pirate all his life, running from Sanan imperials, destroying beasts of the sea and land. Even fighting against the Grave Eclipse. But the battle… that was nothing like Eoleo had experienced before. The screams. The blood.

"What are you talking about Amiti? Snap out of it!" Eoleo gave the Adept a gentle shake.

Amiti looked Eoleo in the eyes. "Matt went to the *Anemos.* He met Sheba! She told him that the Empyror is planning something… he has some machine."

"Like the Luna Tower?" Eoleo offered.

Amiti nodded. "But far worse."

"That's where Matt went? To stop him?"

Amiti nodded again.

"Then we have to go too! He'll need our help." Eoleo started to head down the small hills, to follow Karis and Tyrell. Amiti followed him.

"You're right. Last night we decided we should split up. A few to Tuaparang, and a few to Tolbi to stop Iodem and his beasts. But Matt didn't want us to follow. He said it would be too dangerous. He must have left in the night," Amiti explained.

The snow was hard to get through, but the two jogged to make it to the edge of the forest. Karis was there, shouting out Tyrell's name. Under the needles and snow that they held, the forest was dark and cold. The forest stopped all the wind dead in its tracks, so it was cold too. Entering it sent a shiver through Eoleo. He tugged the sleeves of his red coat, trying to get them to cover up a bit of exposed wrist.

"He went this way," Karis said, pointing to where the footsteps continued. But the snow was much lighter on the forest floor. Most of it stopped on the tops of the trees, never making it to the ground. It would be harder to track Tyrell this way, but not impossible. He had only ran off moments before. *Not like Matt,* Eoleo thought. *We could be twelve hours behind.*

"I found something!" a voice from deeper in the woods shouted. Tyrell's voice. Eoleo and the others ran after him, their boots leaving more tracks in the snow and thin ice which cracked under their feed.

They reached a small clearing in the woods, where Tyrell was kneeling down. He wore a green jacket like Karis'. Something like the Billish wore, Eoleo realized. The pair seemed to be in tight with Anderjack and his freedom fighters.

Tyrell stood up and stretched out his palms to the other three companions. In his brown glove was a piece of grey ash. "Feel it," Tyrell urged.

Eoleo went to touch it, but Tyrell pulled his palm back. "Take your gloves off first."

Amiti, who didn't have any gloves on, touched it first. "Warm," he said simply. Eoleo and Karis pulled off their gloves hastily and confirmed. It was easy for a Mars adept like Eoleo to feel even the slightest bit of heat.

"Look!" Amiti pointed to a stump with green rope attached. Surrounding it, there were horse tracks in the snow. Another sign that someone had made camp recently.

The tracks made a trail that headed straight north, along the path Matt would have taken to get to Cape Casper. Tyrell immediately began to follow the trail. The rest jogged to keep up. As they went the tracks went from what had been a trot, to a gallop. Whoever made these tracks was in quite the rush.

They only had to follow the tracks for a few minutes before they found themselves in a thin gorge. They were between two massive rock walls, at least a few hundred yards tall. The pathway between them was only two or three people wide. The group went single file. The ground wasn't as snowy as the rest of the forest, so the going was much quicker.

When they passed the crest of a small hill, they were greeted with a massive wall of earth. Freshly overturned dirt and rock, completely blocking the way forward. The sight was unmistakable. Earth psynergy had been used. And judging by the actual *warmth* of the earth itself, it couldn't have been more than a day ago.

"Matt!" Tyrell shouted as he kicked the dirt. "He blocked us out!"

The young Mars adept looked up at the walls of stone around him. Eoleo knew exactly what he was thinking.

"It'd take a day to climb it. That's if you didn't fall," Eoleo said. Tyrell glanced at him annoyedly. Eoleo shrugged.

"Then we'll take the whole thing down," Tyrell argued.

Eoleo looked the mound of dirt and rock up and down. There were even some full tree trunks sticking out of the dirt like toothpicks. "I'm not sure that's possible. Not without an earth Adept."

Amiti glanced at Eoleo. "We have no Venus adepts among the Ayuthayans. Are there any in the beastmen or Billish armies?" Amiti directed the question to Karis and Tyrell.

Karis shook her head, "A few. But they wouldn't be capable of taking this down." Karis waved a hand up at the massive mound. "Not without days or even weeks of time."

"Time we don't have," Tyrell growled.

Then the group heard someone approaching from behind. Eoleo turned to see a young Sanan woman. She was dressed in a dark green tunic and pants, along with a long black braid. She had a sword on her belt and bow on her back.

Suddenly it clicked for Eoleo. It was Mei. The Sanan captain that Eoleo and Amiti encountered on the Khiren Glacier. The one who had let them past unhurt.

Amiti took a step forward, "Mei Da?"

She nodded pensively and glanced at the group. Amiti took another step and Mei Da flinched. Her eyes darted towards the sword at Amiti's hip and then to the hilt of her own blade. Amiti put two hands up.

"Did you follow us here?" Tyrell huffed.

"No," Mei said and her eyes narrowed.

"Then what are you doing here?" Tyrell asked curtly. "Did you escape the camp?"

"Tyrell! We know her," Amiti urged.

"You know one of the Sanan soldiers? Look, she's even armed," Tyrell gestured at the Sanan's sword and bow.

Eoleo shook his head. "She wasn't at the battle. We met her in the highlands. She was the one who let us pass."

"She told us Sveta escaped," Amiti added.

Mei's shoulders tensed. "And did you keep your word?"

Amiti glanced quickly at Eoleo. "We're working on it."

"What word?" Karis asked.

Amiti glanced at Eoleo again. "Hey, this wasn't *my* deal," Eoleo said. *I'm not explaining this,* he thought.

The Ayuthayan shifted his weight from one leg to the other. He shivered as a howl of wind went through the crevice. "We promised to treat the Sanan prisoners well, and release them once the war ended."

"And the war has ended, hasn't it? I've seen your camp. You still have many Sanan captives. It's time for my people to go home," Mei said firmly, her Sanan accent sounding stronger than usual.

Amiti shook his head, "Ban-Jei is dead. His army has been captured or driven out of Morgal. But the war isn't over."

"Not until Wo is dead," Tyrell said.

"He doesn't have to die. He just has to… step down," Karis amended.

Mei shook her head, "I am not a Wo supporter. You don't need to say it so diplomatically. Maybe we can work together."

"We have more important things to worry about right now! We need to get past this barricade," Tyrell huffed as if suddenly remembering about Matt.

"I don't think the person who left this wanted to be followed," Mei said cautiously.

Karis' eyes widened, "You came across him?"

Mei Da nodded. "He is your friend?" she hazarded a guess.

"Yes, and he needs our help! When did you see him? Where? What was he doing?" Tyrell said quickly.

"Take it easy Tyrell," Eoleo urged. The younger Mars adept barely glanced over at the pirate.

"I saw him back at my camp, last night. A few hundred yards back that way," Mei gestured in the direction of the army camp. "He snuck up on me. But he didn't want any trouble. Just wanted my horse. Offered me more than enough gold for it, so I made the trade. I was just happy not to be captured or killed."

"The tracks we were following," Karis said, putting two and two together.

Mei nodded, "He rode away fast. Like he was running away from danger."

Amiti sighed. "He's heading *to* danger. He doesn't want us to follow him."

Mei nodded silently. "He's a day's ride ahead of us now. Even if you were to get down this barricade… you wouldn't catch him."

Tyrell looked down at his boots. Eoleo put a hand on the Goman boy's shoulder. "He won't be alone. He's got Sheba. Believe me, she's quite the warrior." Eoleo had more memories of his toddler years than most people did. He wondered if it had to with the early onset of his psynergetic powers. He could still remember Sheba coming to Champa all those years ago, before the Golden Sun rose. He could remember her summoning storms of electricity on her enemies.

Tyrell nodded slightly. "Then maybe we can help each other," he looked at Mei. "Maybe we can get rid of Wo."

It took a little bit of convincing, but Mei agreed to go back to the army's camp. The adepts and Mei Da met with the leaders of the armies. Anderjack and Margaret were there, representing the Billish. Along with Khurt, the beastman leader of Sveta's guard. He had joined the army while Eoleo and the adepts were tracking Matt, and was now acting as the general for the beastmen army. All three leaders respected the adept's judgement, and Mei Da was allowed to enter the camp as an ambassador. Baghi was there as well, representing Passaj.

The group met in Khurt's war tent, around a huge table, with a detailed map of Morgal covered in tiny wooden markers representing armies and fortresses.

Once the formalities were over with, Mei spoke first. "I want you all to know," she looked at Anderjack, Margaret, and Khurt, "I am not your enemy. My people didn't fight you on the burning plains. We tried to stop this invasion every step of the way."

"But you're here aren't you? In our land. You were part of the group that held the Queen hostage," Khurt said angrily, his fur quivering.

"I was," Mei met his gaze firmly. "We couldn't beat Wo in open rebellion. There aren't enough of us. We had to undermine him from the inside."

"*We?*" Margaret asked, catching the word that was also making Eoleo wonder.

"You said earlier that the Sanans have been driven out of Morgal. That isn't exactly true. You have all of the imperial loyalists. But not the ones who want him gone. We're called Blue Iris, and we've been operating in secret against Wo.

Since the moment Unan was killed. We have infiltrated every part of his army and his government."

"His army too? Then what happened when the fighting started? The Battle of Belinsk, and the Battle of Ard Mezza. What did your *Blue Iris* do then?" Khurt asked. He put both front paws on the table.

Mei shifted. "I was at the Battle of Belinsk. Blue Iris couldn't stop it. So we intentionally missed our shots. Tried to spare lives without getting caught."

"Did it work?" Anderjack asked, scratching his black beard.

"Sometimes. Ban-Jei began to catch on. Some of us were executed for treason. After that, many of the rebels turned their backs on Blue Iris and joined the army for real," Mei explained cautiously.

"What about Ard Mezza? What did Blue Iris do then?" Eoleo asked.

"I wasn't there. But from what I've heard, the moment the fighting the true rebels abandoned the battlefield."

"It's true," Amiti confirmed quickly. "When we joined the fight we saw many Sanans running the opposite direction. We assumed they were just cowards."

"And they were," Khurt said. "They should have joined *us.* They should have stood and fought Ban-Jei!"

Mei couldn't help but let out a laugh. Khurt growled at that. "Only to be killed by both armies! The imperials would slaughter them for betraying, while your people would have killed or captured us for wearing the Sanan colours."

There was a silence as Mei and Khurt stared at each other with hostility. Eoleo had never imagined he'd ever be at a war council with a *Sanan* and a *beastman* attempted to work as allies. The nations had been at war for nearly as long as he could remember. It was all the more ironic that *Eoleo* was there trying to make peace between them. The pirate smirked to himself.

"Do you know how many times I've plundered from both of you? Sanans and beastmen both," Eoleo asked. He looked from Mei Da to Khurt.

Tyrell let out a snort. Karis' eyes widened. "What are you doing?" Amiti whispered.

"You tolerate me though, don't you?" Eoleo asked.

"I don't even know you," Khurt said. He frowned. "The last time I saw you, you were hanging from a bird cage one hundred yards above the ocean."

"Okay hold up," Eoleo tried to backtrack. *This isn't going how I thought.*

"What are you getting at?" Mei asked, clearly growing impatient.

Eoleo flinched. "Wait!" he looked back over at Khurt. "That's *not* the last time you saw me! I was at the Dawn Festival! The Queen saw me off personally. Which meant you must have seen it too. Captain of the guard and all." Eoleo gave him a wide smile.

Khurt finally smirked. "I do remember."

"See! Now we're friends," Eoleo urged.

"Well-" Khurt started.

"Best friends," Eoleo interrupted. "And if the captain of the royal guard of Morgal can be chums with the Pirate Prince of the Great Eastern Sea, then why can't you be friends?" He looked at Mei and Khurt.

"That was absurd," Mei said blankly, with a single blink.

Chapter 4: The Angel

Yet again, Sveta traveled the winding roads of her country alone. It had been days since departing Kolima. Now that the Sanan threat was gone from Morgal, the roads were much fuller. The steppe began to teem with life as beastman prepared for the long winter ahead. The short war made it difficult, but they were making due. They hastily finished the harvest, and repaired their villages for the snows that would blanket Morgal for months.

Sveta witnessed soldiers of Roman's army coming home to their family's all over the steppe. She also saw parents, brothers and sisters, fiancee's and spouses, receiving bad news. She saw old beastmen fall to their knees in utter despair upon learning their son was killed in action, fighting the invaders. Still, they had to do their work of preparing for winter. Sveta mourned for them. She mourned for Matthew, who had lost his father in the war.

Isaac died saving my people, and I wasn't there. I let Matthew's father be lost doing what I should have done. Her eyes watered up when she thought of Matthew, what he must be feeling. She had felt it before, losing her parents during the first Sanan invasion. She should have been there for Matthew. *I should be there with him now.* She shook the feeling loose. Tret and Laurel had given her a different path. She had to follow it. She had to trust them, and she had to trust Felix. It was perhaps the only way Alex could be stopped.

But she didn't have much to go on. The grave of an ancient hero somewhere on the almost endless ocean. Sveta wasn't much of a sailor, let alone a navigator. Eoleo had filled that role for their group, as they traveled the Eastern Sea

searching for the Umbra Gear. Gear that was now who knows where. The last Sveta had seen of it, it was in the possession of General Ban-Jei. From rumours, Sveta gleaned that the man was now dead and his army captured. Matthew had been there, at his downfall. Perhaps he has the Umbra Gear now. First thing was first though, and that was the search for Robin's Grave, the search for the secret which would allow Alex to control Apollo's Lens.

Even though Morgal was once again free of Sanan occupiers, Sveta traveled the roads in secret. Her hood covered her face, and her distinctly violet hair was kept between her coat and shirt. She offered only quick smiles to passerbyers, and kept the words exchanged short and sweet. She aroused some suspicion, but soldiered on in spite of it. Her people would surely want to help her, but she couldn't afford for rumours of her travel to spread. There was no telling what ears Alex had across Weyard. If she was to stop him, she would have to remain in the shadows.

A cloud of dust engulfed Sveta and she coughed, as a wagon passed her on the southeast road. She was only a few hours walk from her destination, Port Rago. A day earlier, the flatness of the central plains had given away to rolling hills, spotted with leafy trees, that dominated the coastal region. Morgal had one of the most diverse set of landscapes of any nation. Besides the rolling hills and steppe, there was the mountainous south, the wonder that was Kolima Forest, the magnificent and massive Lake Bycal, and huge swathes of boreal forests in the north. Not to mention the five solitary mountains that dotted the steppe. The Great Beasts, as beastmen lore called them.

The air warmed a bit, the close Sveta got to Port Rago. And the people changed. This part of Morgal was far more diverse than the steppe. There were beastman still, but

there were also humans of Billish descent. Even some who had Sanan roots. Most were merchants or sailors. In times of peace, Port Rago traded with many places, even Sana.

When she arrived, she walked in freely. No guards were stationed at the town's eastern edge. The town's cube buildings were unmarked by war. The Sanan navy completely passed over the coastal town, on their voyage to Belinsk. Now that the war was over, men and women bustled about as normally as ever, selling goods, repairing ships. A warm wind rushed through the town, from the warm current of the sea. Children ran about the stone docks, pushing each other into the water for fun. Sveta could almost forget that it was winter, she could almost forget there was a new, more dangerous war on Morgal's doorstep. Almost.

She walked along the stone road westwards, towards the dock. Somehow, she had to acquire a boat. It would have to be a one-man vessel, and capable of traversing the roughest of waters. Sveta worried about whether she could even operate such a craft.

At the end of a dock there was a Champan ship. Huge, with three separate masts. Far bigger than Eoleo's boat, and adorned with flags and carvings. A wooden carving of a dragon pointed out at its tip. It was in a state of disrepair though, with sailors all about patching its hull and sails. There was a thin board that led from the stone dock up to the ship's deck. Sveta walked up to it.

On the deck a slender old Champan ordered his sailors about. His bald head was covered by a green bandana. A small red cape, like the one Briggs wore, hung from his neck, and he wore a hefty grey beard.

"Oy! Stranger! What are ya doin on my boat?" the old man rushed towards Sveta, and his sandaled foot nearly stepped on Sveta's open paw. He had thin brown eyes and light wrinkles. He frowned at Sveta, and his eyes narrowed as he tried to peak beneath Sveta's hood.

Sveta unhooded herself. "It's good to see you," she smiled.

"Sveta!" Dara said. He was a pirate of Champa, and Brigg's best friend. Sveta had met him at Champa, during the Grave Eclipse. He had initially been very hostile to her. Traditionally, there wasn't much love between the Champan pirates and the Morgal royalty. This pirate particularly had multiple run-ins with Sveta's father, in their youth. But seeing as she was a friend of Eoleo's, he quickly warmed up. What was in the past, was in the past, Sveta reminded herself. Eoleo had fundamentally changed her view on the pirate nation.

Dara gave her a hearty handshake and hug. "It's good to see you too," his voice was raspy and low. "We thought… we thought you were dead," he added quietly.

"Nope," Sveta smiled.

"I knew it! Knew those damned Sanan cowards wouldn't get ya." Suddenly his face darkened and a tirade began. "If was up to me they'd all be damned to-"

"Sveta!" a voice interrupted him. It was Chaucha, Eoleo's mother. Her hair was brown streaked with grey and her face lined with young wrinkles. She wore a simple dress, brown and purple, and smiled warmly at Sveta. She was regal and beautiful in her old age. She looked to Sveta as a true queen should look. They hugged.

"We thought," Chaucha trailed off, "It's so good to see you." She gave Sveta another warm smile.

The sailors around the deck began to murmur quietly among themselves as they saw Sveta. She looked around at them nervously.

Chaucha nodded in understanding. "You're trying to remain hidden?"

Sveta nodded, "Is there somewhere we can speak quietly?" "Yes, in the cabin," Chauched nodded her head towards the ship's cabin, a simple wooden hut that sat directly on the deck of the ship. They walked towards it.

Dara led the way. Before walking through the door of the cabin, he bellowed at the crew, "None of you saw a *thing.* Understood?"

A chorus of acknowledgments came from the deck and dock next to the boat. Sveta sighed a breath of relief. These men and women could be counted on. Sveta had experienced it more than once.

Inside the cabin was enough room for a table with four chairs. Offered to her was wine and cheese, and stale bread. Sveta easily accepted, having been famished after her rushed hike from Kolima. The three ate together quietly for a while, Sveta filling her belly with sub par bread that tasted quite amazing to her.

Eventually, Chaucha broke the silence. "Sveta, are you alright? Can we help you?"

"I'm okay… but you can help me," Sveta put her piece of bread down. Quickly, she recounted the story of what had happened to her since the quest to end the Grave Eclipse

had ended. She found it surprisingly difficult to relieve the trauma of the attack on Belinsk, and being held captive for so long in the Khiren Highlands. Finally she got to the part where Tret and Laurel asked her to find Robin's Grace, to stop Alex.

"Wow," Dara said simply when she had finished. "Magic and visions and sorcery. All of that… that's…" his raspy voice grew quieter. "That's Obaba stuff."

Obaba stuff, Sveta smiled to herself. The adept was strange to their people, but deeply respected. Sveta took it as a good sign that Dara said *Obaba stuff.* He trusted Sveta.

"Sveta dear, why a one-man ship? We can help you. The boat is almost done with repairs," Chaucha said kindly. Sveta thought back to how the ship looked from the dock. *Hardly likely,* she thought sadly.

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I think too big a crew would alert Alex. Besides, there's not much you'll be able to help with once I find the Grave. These things are usually…"

Sveta didn't know how to finish. "For adepts?" Dara finished. Sveta nodded. It was extremely dangerous for non-adepts to go spelunking in the ruins of ancient civilizations. She didn't know how to word that without being offensive.

There was a long quiet and Sveta asked, "What happened to the ship?"

"Something strange," Dara said suddenly louder than before.

Chaucha nodded. "We were engulfed in fog. Like nothing I've ever seen before. And the waters spun us around. We completely lost our bearings… and then… I'm not sure…"

Dara gulped some ale from his goblet. "We were attacked. Simple as that."

"By who?" Sveta asked.

Chaucha sighed. "That's where it's less simple. We couldn't really see through the thick fogs. But we could hear…"

Dara took another swig. "Ghosts. Had to be."

"Ghosts?" Sveta wasn't sure she had heard correctly. She had seen phantoms before, but only deep within dungeons. Never attacking ships on the open sea.

Chaucha trembled slightly. "It could have been. I'm not sure. They shrieked. It seemed they were moving through the ship. But also knocking us back and forth."

Dara nodded. "When it subsided, all we could do was rush to the nearest port for repairs. Lost a few good sailors." Dara closed his eyes solemnly.

"I'm so sorry." Sveta said.

It seemed then that Chaucha was thinking about all the hardships that Sveta had to endure, because she put a comforting arm on Sveta's shoulder. "I'm sorry too, Queen Sveta."

Sveta smiled at that. For a Champan to call a beastmen *Queen*, that was unheard of. Perhaps things were finally changing. For the better.

After a while Dara spoke up. "We have a ship for you Sveta. Lemurian."

"Ah, yes. *Angel* it's called," Chaucha said. "Operable by one person alone. And fast too. It'll take you where you need to go."

Sveta smiled. "Thank you! You can afford to lose it for a while?"

"Yep," Dara added, "None of us can operate it anyways. We only have it docked here for Eoleo's using, but he's been gone for a while. Off with those Ayuthayans I hear."

Sveta connected the dots. "Operable only by psynergy?"

"Is that what you call magic?" Dara asked, taking another bite of stale bread.

"I guess," Sveta smiled.

"Then yes," Dara said firmly.

Sveta spent the night on the deck of the Champan ship, sleeping under the stars. Nothing but the sea wind and a few blankets warmed her, but it was enough. For the first time since Tret and Laurel started speaking to her in visions, she had a dreamless sleep. She woke better rested than she had been in weeks, with a belly full of Champan fish and bread. Dara even fried bacon and eggs for her in the morning, and Chaucha treated her to some coffee straight from central Gondowan. It was enough to warm Sveta's soul more completely than it had been since she had last seen Matthew.

When breakfast was finished, Chaucha and Dara led Sveta down the dock and through Port Rago. The city was bustling, the same as the day before. The three went into the great underground docks and Sveta shivered in the cold, drawing

her fur coat out of its pack again. She had almost forgotten that it was indeed winter.

There, at the end of the dock, was the sleak Lemurian vessel. The word *Angel* was written in gold ink on its hull. Sveta had seen ships like it in the past, when some important people visited Belinsk back in the glory days before the occupation. This ship had no sails, just a beautiful dark wooden hull, with a metal perimeter on the small deck. A small part was covered, for sleeping. The rest was open to the sky and seas, and a small black orb was mounted at the bow. Sveta had seen one before, it was for psynergy operation.

"Pretty, isn't she?" Dara offered.

Sveta nodded, "Beautiful."

Sveta jumped up onto the deck and touched the black orb, feeling her psynergy merge with it. Upon touching it, she felt almost as though the entire ship was imbued with psynergy, and that it was an extension of her own psynergy, of her own body even.
"We can't teach you how to use it unfortunately," Chaucha said.

"I understand," Sveta said.

Dara laughed to himself. "I'm sure you'll figure it out in no time. Eoleo never had a problem with such things. And you seem like only half the bonehead he is."

Sveta laughed, "I'll take that as a compliment."

Chaucha scowled at Dara. "What! It *is* a compliment," Dara protested.

As it turned out, Dara had been correct. It took no time as all to figure out the workings of the *Angel.* After bidding warm fair wells to Chaucha and Dara, Sveta hit the open sea. She found herself enjoying it far more than she expected. The feel of the waves underneath her feet, and the warm winds howling with no trees or mountains to stop it. Even the taste of salt as the water splashed around her. She loved it all.

It helped that the seas were quiet and the winds warm still. Sveta just sailed ideally around the ocean for a little while with little aim. *What does a grave in the middle of the ocean look like?* She wondered. She had a feeling she would know it when she saw it.

Eventually, after growing tired of sailing aimlessly, she made port at a small island village. The villagers gawked at her ship, having never seen anything like it. She got the feeling that they never saw much of the outside world in general. They only had heard vague whispers about the war going on on the mainland.

In any case, the village still had an inn, which amounted to a small cabin with three small rooms and a warm hearth. Sveta was thankful for it. She spent the evening pouring over a map of the eastern sea. With a quill she crossed out the places she had already visited during her quest with Matthew. The grave was likely not in one of those locations, as the group probably would have noticed it. What she was left with was a marked up map with a series of empty regions. This is where she would check first.

There was a large empty region just to the east of the island village. The next morning, Sveta set out for it. It was a swath of ocean Sveta had never seen before, but it looked remarkably like every other swath of ocean Sveta had seen in the past. The air was colder here, and some of the allure

of sailing had begun to lose its luster. Sveta huddled under her thick fur jacket. The day was still clear though. Which made for easy navigating.

She methodically and mechanically checked every part of the region, using her map as a guide. After a few hours of this, she noticed a strange glean far to the east. It looked as though something was out there floating on the water. It didn't look like another ship. Sveta had already seen a few of those. *No… this is something else.* Her spirit sense made the fur on the back of her neck stand up.

In twenty minutes, she was within a few yards. It was a large plank of wood. That's all. Something left over from a shipwreck. Sveta sighed. But then… no. It wasn't just a plank. Something floated on it. A pile of furs and blankets.

As she approached, it became clear. There was a person under the blankets.

"Are you alright!" Sveta shouted at the adrift figure. The blankets stirred and a girl appeared. Short and pale. Her face was dirty and her dark hair completely frayed. On her forehead was a red tattoo. Sveta gasped.

"Himi!"

Chapter 5: Cape Casper

Matthew stood with his hands on his knees, taking heaving breaths between the two canyon walls. Snow fell slowly, collecting on his hair and shoulders. In front of him a massive wall of dirt, stone, and branches. He had upturned it from the earth below, completely blocking the narrow path. What few winter birds that had not flown south yet flocked to the fresh earth, feasting on the worms and bugs that had been exposed. Matthew had to crane his neck to look at the top of the pile he had made. *They won't be getting through that any time soon,* Matthew thought.

He felt a pang of regret. He had done *everything* with his companions. They had fought great evil everywhere. But he couldn't put them through this. A trek to the northern wastes of the world in the dead of winter, to face a dark empire forgotten by the winds of time. Matthew knew that this task meant almost certain death. He could not, he would not, lead his friends into that. *Besides,* he thought, *they have other things to deal with.* He thought of Sana and Tolbi and the war that plagued Angara.

Beside Matthew his grey horse neighed uncomfortably. Floyd's hooves were beginning to sink into the snow. He was a grey hanner, the royal beast of Morgal. They grew larger than the horses from Goman, and were more stout in all conditions. *Including snow,* Matthew thought gratefully. He put a hand on Floyd's mane to calm him. "Time to go?"

Flloyd neighed urgently. Matthew smiled, and bounded up to the saddle. "Hya!"

Although Matthew had blocked the path, he didn't slow his pace any. There was still no telling how close the Tuaparang

were to using their weapon. He kept the black orb that would lead him to the Empyror's dark machine safe in his pack, but he had no need for it yet. His current destination was Cape Casper, and he rode there with as much speed as Flloyd could muster in the thick snow and frigid breezes. At the end of the road there would be a village, and from there a ferry could take him to Whitepoint, the peninsula where Imil sat.

After a day of riding, the canyons and rocks gave way to more flat plains. There was little shelter there, but Matthew made do with what he had, setting up a tent that was nearly covered in snow by the next morning. He rode on through the plains which eventually turned into a hilly land spotted with trees. That gave way to areas of denser woods which the road winded through. There were frozen lakes and cold streams. Flloyd seemed to prefer the cover of the forests over the open steppe. The snow was lighter there, and the winds were dulled by the tall pine trees.

For a few days, Matthew made his way north in this manor, with Flloyd as his only companion. He ice fished, hunted, and survived on the wares he had received from the Billish army. The air grew colder and colder and the adept was thankful for the thick furs the beastmen had adorned him during their march.

He remembered often the battle. The slow snow and the Sanans. He remembered Alex. Letting him get away. Mostly though, he thought of things from longer ago. He thought of growing up in Kalay, and the trips he took with his father in the summer. He remembered Isaac teaching him letters, swordplay, tracking, fishing, and so many more things during those long days in the Goman highlands. He remembered the fires they had at night. And at night,

Matthew wept. Flloyd would nuzzle his mane into Matthew's head.

"Slow boy," Matthew urged. They'd finally arrived. In front of Matthew and Flloyd, there about eight hundred yards in front of them, was the end of Cape Casper, where a village slept below a starry night. Beyond that was the sea, dotted with floating ice. Flloyd slowed and neighed happily. Matthew smiled.

Flloyd trotted that last mile, and when he arrived at the village, Matthew jumped off. A beastman with a long grey beard and round ears approached. He held a torch to Matthew. The adept could feel the heat of it on his face. He was grateful for that. He could almost feel his nose again.

"State yer business," the beastman said carefully.

"I'm looking for passage to Whitepoint. I was told I could find a ferry here," Matthew answered as politely as he could.

"Well, yer in luck then. Last boat leaves tomorrow. Inn's thataway," the beastman said, pointing at a humble cabin.

"Who do I talk to? For the ferry tomorrow?" Matthew asked.

The beastman smiled, showing crooked teeth. "My boat. So I supposed you'd talk to me. Right?" Matthew didn't say anything, and the old beastman laughed. "Just be at the dock tomorrow at sunrise. I'm sure even a question asking fella such as yerself can find the only dock without help?"

Matthew nodded. The two discussed price, and Matthew parted with a bit more coin than he was comfortable with. He supposed he had no choice.

He stayed the night in a hay bed in the loft of a cabin. The locals called this an inn. Whatever it was, Matthew was still grateful for a warm bed and roof over his head. *It even had four walls,* was the last thing Matthew thought before drifting to sleep.

The next day Matthew and Flloyd loaded onto a small schooner with an assortment of beastmen and humans. They were hunters and trappers mostly. Many of them had been trapped in Morgal during the blizzards that came after the battle of Ard Mezza. Some went home after a season of hunting, while others were heading away from home to start a season of ice-fishing. They all seemed to understand each other though, and there was no conflict between men and beastmen. A few of them had participated in the battle against Sana, but none of them fought at the battle of Ard Mezza. They were too far from north, isolated from the brunt of the conflict. Up in the distant north, the only thing that mattered usually were fish and deer.

That evening, after a day of looking at him quizzically, some of the trappers decided to ask Matthew a few questions. He sat with a group of them under the deck, drinking warmed wine and eating salted venison.

"What village do you come from?" a trapper with a leather cap asked him.

Matthew smiled, "Have you heard of Kalay?"

The trapper laughed, "Who do you think we are? Wildlings? Yes, I've heard of Kalay."

One of the younger ones, a human hunter, looked astounded. "You come all the way from Kalay? What are you *doing* here?"

There was no reason for Matthew to distrust these people. In fact, from the little he knew of them, he liked and trusted them naturally. But on the other hand, he was tired. He wasn't sure if they could even wrap their heads around half the things he would have to tell them just to provide some *context* for what he was doing. "I'm a warrior," he decided to say. He raised his sol blade for them to see, but kept in its sheath. "Fight leads me north."

"To Prox?" the young hunter said.

That took Matthew by surprise. He supposed he might end up stopping in Prox. It could end up being on the way, depending on where his black orb led him. But the fact that his hunter mentioned such a faraway, and almost mythical place, took Matthew off guard. "Could," Matthew admitted.

The old trapper shook her head. "Your too late son. It's been overrun."

Matthew raised his eyebrows, "Overrun? By who?"

The trapper looked confused. "The dark ones. Black armour. Black swords. I figured you would know more about this sort of thing than me."

"Is there anything else you know," Matthew asked. From their reactions, Matthew could tell they detected the hint of worry in his voice.

"That's about it," the trapper said. "Dark ones came out of the north last year, doing all sorts of patrols. They took Prox only a week ago. We pray to the gods that they stop there. Winter has come, but it doesn't seem to slow them."

The room fell into an uneasy quiet.

"It won't," a low voice came from the corner of the room. One of the trappers who had been stuck in the blizzards was sitting on a low chair. There was a green hood over his head. "If I were you, I'd start barring my door."

The rest of the journey was uneventful. The boat arrived at another small village on the other side of the bay, where Matthew stayed the night at an inn among many of the trappers and hunters that he had gotten to know. After that, he and Flloyd made all haste towards Imil, where Sheba would be waiting for him. But so much had happened since he flew down from Anemos. Matthew wondered if she would even be there.

Imil was barely anything like Matthew had remembered it, but the last time he had been there he was only five. What was the same was the ice and snow covered roofs, the frozen stream in the middle of town, and the faces of the people. Pale with light coloured hair, covered in furs and skins. They smiled friendly at Matthew. He was halfway to the inn when someone approached him.

"Matt? Is that you?" a man said walking towards him. He was a built man with a thick black beard and leather cap. He reminded Matthew of Anderjack. The man smiled, which reminded Matthew of someone else. "You probably don't remember me," the man said with sudden realization. "I'm Rief's father."

"Crown?" Matthew asked. The man nodded. He pulled Matthew into a hug.

He shook his head in disbelief. "Last time I saw you, you were this tall," Crown put his hand out. "What are you *doing* here?" He asked with a broad smile.

Matthew sighed. "It's a long story." A cold breeze blew up a flurry of snow, and Matthew pulled his scarf up over his mouth and nose.

"Let's get inside," Crown said. The big trapper led Matthew through a wide street towards a wooden building with a snow-laden roof. In front of the door the word *Inn* was etched into a plank. Inside, a hearth heated the room, and the innkeeper offered a table, and warm mulled wine. Matthew sipped at it slowly. He would have felt comfortable there, if it hadn't been for the trapper sitting on the other side of the room, eying them. It was the same man, with the green hood, Matthew had met on the schooner.

"So, what brings you all the way out here, in the middle of winter?" Crown looked concerned.

Matthew ran through a quick retelling of the events that had transpired since the end of his quest for the Roc feather. Crown gasped with Matthew described the inner sanctum of Mount Aleph, but his jaw dropped when the story moved into the lost city of the Anemos. As the story moved into the events at Bilibin and Ard Mezza, Crown began to nod with understanding, having heard some news from the war recently.

"Sheba was supposed to meet you here?" Crown said slowly, after the story had finished.

Matthew nodded. "She had Darkguard, the shield that's needed to defeat the Tuaparang Empyror. And I have the map that leads to him," Matthew held out the black stone orb. "Have you seen her?"

Crown gave a serious look, and scratched his black beard pensively. "I'm afraid not. The schooner you came in on was

the first since the blizzards. I suppose she could have come by land though."

"But you don't think so?" Matthew guessed.

Crown nodded. "Not likely. Imil is not a large town, we would notice someone like her."

"Would you?" A voice came from beside them. Matthew jumped. It was the man in the green hood. He pulled it down to reveal a worn face, one that looked familiar. He had long dark brown hair and a scruffy beard.

Crown looked taken aback. "Felix?"

Chapter 6: The Tide of Luna

The wanderer remembered the green hills. He remembered the cottage by the river in the spring sun, and he remembered his sister. She had her red hair done down, flowing down her shoulders. She crouched near next to the river, and beside her was the boy. His hair had only just started to grow. He smiled and laughed. The wanderer's sister encouraged him. The boy took his first steps.

The boy was now a man. Matt sat on a wooden bench with a warm mead in front of him. His mouth was agape. Across from him was Mia's husband, Crown, who scratched at his black beard with confusion written on his face.

"Felix?" the trapper said slowly. "What are you doing here?"

The wanderer watched the boys face reel in confusion. He met his nephew's eyes. "Same thing as you."

Matt shook his head, "You're… alive?"
The wanderer nodded. He fiddled uncomfortably with the black ring on his finger, the one his mother had given him.

Matt's mouth was practically agape. "Where have you *been*?" When the wanderer remained silent, a cloud went over Matt's face and it changed from confused to cold. "We needed you."

"I know," the wanderer said calmly. "I've been trying to help." There was another awkward silence before the wanderer asked, "May I sit?"

Matt nodded silently, and the wanderer took a seat next to Crown in the crowded booth. The night had grown dark, and Crown lit a small candle in the centre of the table. Through its light, the wanderer could see Matt's face. It startled him. It was like looking through a vision, or a seeing glass. Matt was the spitting image of his father Isaac. The wanderer tried to speak. He didn't know what he wanted to say. Part of him wanted to apologize for being away. Part of him wanted to desperately ask about how all his old friends were doing. Another part wanted to tell him that he had been there, following in Matt's footsteps, trying to make sure he would accomplish the quest and end the dark eclipse. The wanderer wanted to tell his nephew that he had watched over him. The words felt like dry bread in his throat. He muttered something.

"Go on," Matt said impatiently. "Where have you been?"

The wanderer closed his eyes for a long moment and then opened them. Briefly he told Matt and Crown about the mountain in the south of Tundaria, and about the Luna Sanctum underneath it. He told them about the map that showed him where the dangers of Luna were looming, the vortexes mainly. In less detail, he told them about the visions and voices of the ancients that he had heard for years. The ones that guided him to the map beneath the mountain.

"There's a great disturbance in the north. An immense store of Luna. And it's spreading. I can feel it." The wanderer flexed his fingers into fists.

Matt had made no expression during the story. He listened intently, but there was no hint of anger, or forgiveness, or… there was just nothing there. "What about the Eclipse? Have

you seen what the power of Luna has done to Angara while you were away?"

"I did," the wanderer said flatly. *But I wasn't away,* the wanderer thought. He remembered the cold nights alone that he spent on the great Sanan wall, watching over Matt and his companions. He tried to speak, but the silence was too heavy. *Too much time alone,* the wanderer thought with frustration.

Crown, clearly uncomfortable, broke the silence, "Have you seen Sheba?"

The wanderer's eyes lit up. *Sheba*, he thought, his heart breaking just a little. *I promise,* the wanderer remembered telling her in the Tolbi palace all those years ago. "No," he said quickly. "Have you? You've heard from her?"

Matt nodded quietly. After a moment of thought, the boy began to speak. He told the wanderer openly about all that he had seen and done, from the moment he left the lookout cabin to the moment he met Crown in Imil. The wanderer knew much of the story already, having followed Matt through Weyard. The wanderer learned that Matt had been to Sol Sanctum, and that the Wise One was dead. Matt told him about the inner sanctum, with the depiction of the hero standing guard over Weyard. But the wanderer was particularly interested in the tales of Anemos, and of Sheba. His eyes welled up in tears when he heard that she was okay.

When Matt finished the wanderer asked, "Sheba, do you know if she made it out of the battle okay?"

Matt shook his head. "Her aunt Riza sent her a telepathic message to meet me here so we could use this," Matt showed him the spherical dark map, "to find the Tuaparang. But I don't know how the battle ended. I haven't heard from

her or the Anemos since. It was almost like… it feels like a dream."

The wanderer nodded, understanding the feeling more than most. Those weeks he spent in Tundaria, at the holy mountain and ancient city. He shook his head. No one else on Weyard had even seen those things. Matt and Crown were probably now among the few who had even heard of them.

"We should wait for her," Matt said resolutely. "She will come."

Immediately, the wanderer shook his head. "No," he said. "We have no time." He thought of the map in Luna Sanctum, of the darkness growing wildly from the north, injecting its veins into Weyard. He also thought of Sheba, and the disappointment on her face the last time he saw her. The sadness. *Why did you leave,* her words echoed in his mind.

Matt scowled. "You would just abandon her that easily?"

The words stung more than Matt could ever know. The wanderer shook his head. "She can find her own way."

"She can't!" Matt exclaimed. "Have you even been listening? She needs this!" Matt practically pounded the black stone on the table.

"If she can't find her own way, then she can at least take care of herself. She's a powerful adept."

Matt's face contorted into a mix of sadness and anger. "A powerful adept? Just like my dad."

The way Matt said those words. The wanderer knew immediately. His heart sunk. *No, no, it can't be. Please no.*

"Matt…"

"He's dead," Matt's eyes bored into the wanderer's. "Where *were* you?"

After that, Matt got up to leave. The innkeeper showed him to his room, and the two climbed the creaky steps of the old inn. The wanderer tried not to watch him go, but he couldn't help it. The younger adept didn't look back. When Matt faded into the upper floor, the wanderer felt hot tears start to roll down his cheeks. He pulled his long hair back with his fingers. Crown put an arm on his shoulder.

"What happened?" the wanderer asked horsley.

Crown told him everything that Matt had said, about the explosion at Belinsk and Alex's manipulations. It had been his plot all along to have Lycus the trapper guide Rief and Kraden to him on Mount Roc, to trick them into calling for Isaac's help at Belinsk.

The wanderer remembered his friend. The cottage by the river. The spring sun. The clay mugs filled with hot coffee. The wanderer's sister and nephew playing not too far away. Isaac's bright blue eyes and easy smile. *He's got the rest of his life ahead of him,* the wanderer had said.

And you'll be there to help show him the way, Isaac said.

That was the last time Felix ever saw Isaac.

The wanderer wept.

The next morning, the wanderer saw Matt out by the frozen river in the middle of town. The sun was dim, but the sky was clear. In the north the blue light of the Mercury

Lighthouse twinkled. Next to Matt was a snowman with a carrot nose. Matt sat next to it, honing his blade. There was no one else around, except for a white hare that looked at the wanderer curiously, before dashing into the snow.

"I'm leaving today," the wanderer said.

"How will you find the way?" Matt asked without looking up.

"The map at Luna Sanctum gave me a vague idea. But hopefully, I will be using your map."

Matt looked up and frowned, "Will you take it from me?"

"I was hoping you would join me," the wanderer said.

Matt shook his head. "And abandon Sheba? No," he said flatly.

The wanderer sighed. "Then I will have to track it."

He walked away. Matt didn't flinch or look up. He just sat there continuing to work his blade. The wanderer continued through the smalltown, towards the inn. He would gather what little packs he had, and head out.

A little while later, he passed by Mia's house. Crown was outside, chopping logs.

"Felix!" the trapper said. "Are you heading out?"

The wanderer nodded.

"I'm coming with you," Crown said firmly.

The wander shook his head and started to walk away. He felt a strong hand on his shoulder. He turned to see Crown, the

usual cheerful expression had changed into a deadly serious one.

"My wife went out there," the bearded man gestured to the north. "To save a member of our clan. Megan's her name. She came back some time ago, safe and sound. But she said that Mia had continued onwards. Tracking some Tuaparang lass. I'm sure she's got up in all this… moon magic. If I go with you, we will run into her. I *have* to find her."

"What about your children?" the wanderer asked.
"The last I heard, Rief was safe with Kraden in Morgal, which has now been liberated. And Nowell is with Piers," Crown explained.

"And Mia will be with me," the wanderer explained. He tried to move again but Crown held his shoulder firmly.

"Mia is alone. In the northern *wastes.* In the dead of winter. You may be a powerful adept, but you don't know these lands like I do. And you don't know winter like I do."

The wanderer thought to protest for a second. He had traveled to Tundaria alone. But never in the heart of winter. And the south wasn't like the north. The north was unforgiving. Deadly. The wanderer remembered that not even the Proxians dared to travel the wastes in the winter.

The wanderer nodded. Crown smiled broadly. "Let's get our things," he said.

Later that morning, after they had packed their things, they met Matt again on the main floor of the inn, sitting next to the warm hearth.

"We're leaving now son. Last chance," Crown said, putting a kind hand on the younger man's shoulder.

Matt shook his head, staring at the flames. "You can't defeat him without her. She has the Darkguard, and she is Yegelos' heir."

The wanderer frowned. "We have to try."

Despite winter arriving with harsh winds and heavy snows, the trek went as well as it could. The wanderer was immediately grateful to have Crown by his side. The old trapper knew his way through every hunter's path, over every frozen creek, and through every pine thicket. Crown had grown up in these lands, the wanderer remembered. He was no member of the Mercury Clan, but he knew his way around ice and snow as well as the best of them.

The morning of the second day was marked with the mechanical noises of Tuaparang ships in the skies. Felix could barely make out three blobs flying closely together, near Imil. He had seen the ships before, but never up close. From far away they just looked like quickly moving dark clouds. But the sound of them traveled far and loud. The sputtering of the smoky engines. Nothing else in Weyard sounded anything like it. It was unmistakable.

"Scouts?" Crown asked.

The wanderer nodded.

"This way," Crown said in the evening of that day. It was early still, but the sun had already plunged below the horizon, and the wind was starting to blow up tracts of snow into white walls. They buffeted the travelers, and Crown's beard was white with ice. The pale blue light of the faraway Mercury Lighthouse illuminated the trapper's face. Crown pointed to a winding path that branched off from the one

they were walking on. To an untrained eye, the path would have been undetectable, but Crown and the wanderer both saw the slight dip of the snow.

"We're going through the mountains?" the wanderer asked. He looked up at the jagged white peaks ahead of them. No one alive had measured the distance of them, and very few had passed through them to arrive at the wastes beyond and the hidden village of Prox.

Crown nodded. "You wanted to get to Prox didn't you?"

"Aye," the wanderer said. *From there we should be able to learn more about the Tuaparang's exact location,* he thought, *Puelle will know.*

Crown fixed his eyes on the twinkling lighthouse. "Should we rest here," he said, gesturing towards a small hill topped by a pine tree.

The two travelers didn't bother taking watches. The wanderer knew that nothing could sneak up on him, whether or not he was awake. Years of traveling alone had taught him that skill. They made a little fire and warmed themselves by it, wrapped themselves in as many furs and wools as they brought, and drifted off to sleep.

As it turned out, the wanderer didn't need his well honed skill of keeping watch while sleeping. What woke him up would have woken up any sleeper. It was a screech from the northern mountains. The wanderer jolted awake and saw dark figures in the sky, far away. *Shadow Curses,* he thought. The dark ghost that flourished under the power of Luna. His hand went to the hilt of his sword, and he threw the furs and wools aside.

Standing up, he got a better look at the Curses. They were floating a few miles away. At least twenty of them. *Perhaps I'm closer to the Tuaparang's Luna source than I thought,* the Wanderer said.

As if to answer that thought, a cloud appeared over the mountains. It was a fog of complete darkness, somehow far darker than the night sky that surrounded it. No light bounced from it, but rather it was absorbed by its emptiness. It was like a psynergy vortex, or the void that surrounded Weyard. Only it was larger than a vortex, and it *moved.*

Chapter 7: Two Minds

On his knees, Ivan heaved again at the hilt of his sword. It wouldn't budge. His fingers slipped off the slick ice that covered the sword handle, and he felt prickles of freezing pain shoot up the veins of his wrist. He looked over at Piers, who was trying the same thing.

"It's been far too long my friends," a smug voice came from in front of him. The Lemurian looked up from his sword to see Alex standing in front of him. Alex walked through the throne room, unsheathing a smooth silver blade. He stopped a few feet in front of the kneeling Piers and Ivan, and pointed the weapon at them. The door behind Ivan burst opened and eight guards filed into the long room, pointing their heavy spears at the two warriors.

"Master," a raspy voice said. "What is going on? Who are they?" Iodem walked from the table quickly to where the three adepts were, his long white hair flowing. His deep red eyes darted. *This isn't the Iodem I remember.*

Alex smiled widely. "Old friends of mine, your majesty," he said, still glaring down at Ivan. "This is Sir Ivan son of Hammet, and Captain Piers of Lemuria. Two of the mighty Warriors of Vale." There was no mistaking the venomous irony in his tone.

Iodem took a step forward. "Ivan?" he said. "Reveal yourselves."

Ivan looked over at Piers and then at the sword that Alex still held to their throats. He felt the presence of the heavily armoured guards breathing down their neck. Ivan shrugged and took off his heavy iron helmet and the bandana

underneath. Piers did the same, revealing short hair that had been recently dyed black.

Iodem shook his head in astonishment. The man looked almost betrayed. "Ivan, what are you doing here?"

"You're surprised I'm here? You sent an army into my city? An army of *monsters.* And you're surprised I've come to stop you?" Ivan said, getting to his feet as he spoke. Piers stood up with his friend.

The guards flinched but held off when Alex gave them a simple hand signal.

There was a hint of uncertainty in Iodem's eyes as Ivan spoke. "My love," a proud voice said. Princess Tanela, Iodem's young fiance's silk dress dragged as she walked over. "Will we allow this rabble to go unpunished?"

She rubbed the Iodem's back gently.. "Princess… These are the Warriors of Vale. We can't…" Iodem said, his gaze darting wildly with fear. His dark red eyes began to pale, and Ivan thought he got a blue glint to them. Tanela took her hand away from his back and her face clouded over with anger.

Suddenly, Alex sheathed his sword. "Your majesty," Alex said quietly, turning to face Iodem. "Remember why we fight," he whispered to the emperor, putting a hand on his shoulder. Iodem's eyes darkened again, to such a dark red that they were almost black. For a moment he grimaced, his white teeth shimmering. But it was over as quick as it began, and the emperor's face was serious and stern once again.

"Take them to the dungeon for questioning," Iodem said suddenly, and he turned away from them. Tanela smiled and linked arms with the emperor. Iodem sat at the long table in

his hall and began pouring himself and his lady cups of dark red wine. Ivan caught Alex's gaze, and the villain simply shrugged before joining the royals.

The questioning came later that day. A hooded Tolbi soldier joined Ivan and Piers in their dim dungeon cell with an array of strange devices. The young man asked them a series of queries, mostly revolving around the Tolbi rebel group known as the Rakers, and their enigmatic leader. All of which Ivan and Piers politely declined answering. Ivan wondered idly what the soldier would think if he knew Sophia was right under their noses, as a gardener employed by Iodem's royal palace. It quickly became obvious that the so-called torturer's heart wasn't in it. He rarely used the tools, and anything he did left scratches and bruises at worst. The pain was nothing that a simple psynergetic trick couldn't handle. Ivan tried his best to scream in agony.

When the torturer left, Piers and Ivan were left alone in their cells, separated by a metal cage.

"It's Alex. Of course it is," Piers murmured to Ivan. The Mercury adept sat slumped with his back to the damp stone wall.

"Sounds like he's pulling the strings too. Did you hear what Iodem called him?" Ivan said. Something somewhere was dropping, giving him an uneasy feeling.

"Master. Something tells me that Alex would have rather us not heard that little slip."

Ivan stood up to stretch his back. "I don't even think Iodem is in his right mind."

Piers stirred at that. "What do you mean?"

"Cursed," Ivan said simply. "Did you see his eyes?"

"Ya… I thought they were blue. And the last time I saw him he was balding."

"Alex has him bewitched."

"I don't know," Piers hesitated. "Would he go that far?"

"Look around you, Piers. He's clearly in charge of the monsters. Who else could pull something like that off?"

Piers sighed. He ran a hand through his short hair. "I guess you're right."

"I wouldn't be so quick to jump to conclusions," Alex's voice came from down the jail's stone corridor. Ivan rushed to the bars to peer out. Low burning torches lit up the hallway as Alex strode down it, his long purple and white cloak dragging along the wet floor. The Mercury adept stopped in between Piers and Ivan's cells. "How was your interview?"

Ivan looked over at Piers, who shook his head wordlessly.

"Not talkative today?" Alex said. "No matter." He closed his eyes and stretched out an arm towards Ivan.

"What's he doing?" Piers asked nervously.

"I don-" Ivan started. A savage shot of pain shot up his neck and into the back of his head.

Where are the Rakers? Ivan could hear Alex's voice into his mind. Unbidden, a memory came into Ivan's mind. He could see Dragonfell, the tiny mill, and Manus, the old man that had housed him. He saw Sean and Ouranos saving him from the Tolbi captors. He tried to push the memory from his

mind. Another shot of pain crept up, causing him to clutch his shoulders in agony.

I've seen enough, Alex's voice sounded through his head again. He couldn't shake it away. Somewhere, distantly, he heard Piers, "Ivan, what's going on?"

Who leads the Rakers? Alex asked. This time, Ivan was prepared. He focused on the pain, and only the pain. He let that be his whole reality. Nothing could break in.

Who leads the rebels? Alex asked again, this time more angry. More pain. Ivan closed his eyes. He focused on the psynergy coursing through his body. He tried to remember the meditation techniques Hama had taught him. He felt the hot power of psynergy at his fingertips. He focused his will, and exerted it back at Alex.

Where did you learn to mind read? Ivan sent his voice into Alex's mind. The Mercury adept took a step back in shock. The pain in Ivan's head dulled.

Alex grimaced and closed his eyes. He took two steps back towards Ivan's cage.

Who leads the rebels? Alex pushed. *I know you've seen her. I can feel it.*

The pain started to swell again. He focused on the pain, and the psynergy. He would not let the thought of her come into his mind. With a push, Ivan focused as much of his power at Alex as he could manage. *Let me see what you've seen, Alex.*

Alex took a step back again, and the pain dulled again. This time, he couldn't get a handle back in the struggle though, and suddenly, Ivan could see into his mind.

The memories were fast, with almost no time for Ivan to discern them. He saw Alex traveling Weyard, learning psynergy powers from ruins and caverns that Ivan had no idea even existed. Mind read, teleportation, the power to freeze metal, and even the ability to change his appearance. He saw a young Alex sailing the sea with an unknown companion, searching for some long lost spirit. *Fog Princess,* Ivan heard. Then he saw Alex in Imil, meeting with Mia just after the Grave Eclipse. *I had to prevent something worse,* Ivan could hear the adept saying. He could feel Alex's pain. He saw Alex at Mount Roc, collecting the shard of a magma stone. Then Alex was in a snowy plane, the smell of blood and fire all around him. He was back in Tolbi, walking through a small green door at the side of the palace. Down a set of stairs, and he was in a vast catacomb beneath the city. There were Tolbi workers all around him, hacking away at hard brown vines that webbed the caves. He was searching the tunnels, again looking for a long lost spirit. *Oak King,* Ivan heard.

Who are they? Who are the spirits? Ivan pressed.

Alex cried out audibly, and put both hands in front of him. Another rush of pain went through Ivan's body, and abruptly, the link was broken. Like the sound of waves after your ears had been blocked, the world came back to Ivan. The annoying dripping, the cackling of the torches, and Piers standing up at the bars looking concerned.

"I'm alright Piers," Ivan said. He looked over at Alex, who was grimacing. It was hard for Ivan not to smile. He had seen so much.

"What did you see?" Alex demanded.

"Nothing much," Ivan said casually. He leaned back against the cell's wall.

"Tell me."

"Perhaps you should be careful with your new trick," Piers said, having gleaned from their tones what had happened. "Ivan's been doing this for a lot longer than you."

"What did you see?" Alex's voice was a little shaky this time.

Ivan sighed. "You know I'm not going to tell you, Alex."

"Then I should kill you," the Mercury adept said quietly. "But that's not the world I want," as he spoke his voice grew steadier. "I'd much rather you see. I'd rather you *learn.* Learn why it is that I do this. If you understood, then you wouldn't be fighting me. You could be my mightiest allies."

"There's nothing you could say that would justify what you've done," Ivan said firmly. "Kalay. You destroyed it. Hundreds killed." This time, it was Ivan's voice that was shaky. He thought of his wife and children, of his parents. He had no idea if they were alright.

"To prevent something worse," Alex said firmly. "I would expect you would understand something like that. You lit the beacons. Do you know how many died after that? The earthquakes alone killed more than my army ever has. Then there were the vortexes, the volcanoes, tidal waves. You were powerless to stop any of it. You couldn't even save anyone. You've let warlords like Wo and McCoy raise armies, sparring out of pure greed. You've allowed the entire beastman race to be systematically oppressed. For ten years they toiled for their overlords. What were you doing? You were supposed to be their protectors. Look around you! You've failed."

Everything Alex was saying was pain that each of the Warriors of Vale had been forced to live with for the past thirty years. Ivan had gone over it again and again in his head, it had become like an old companion. One that he hated. "We had to light the beacons. You know this," Ivan whispered.

"Of course you did," Alex spat. "But you weren't strong enough to guide Weyard through the new age."

"And you are? You started the Grave Eclipse. Your war has killed more than McCoy or Wo ever will. Weyard is far worse than it ever was because of you," Piers said venomously.

"It's darkest before the dawn, Piers. Everything I've done, I've done for the people. Weyard needs *one* strong arm, guiding it through the new era, not hundreds of selfish warlords. If the people resist, then so be it. They may not know peace, but their children will, and their children's children. Because they need someone who isn't afraid of doing whatever it takes. They need me."